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ABSTRACT

This study explores the professional dimensions of being selected for and maintaining the position of a two-year college president. The exploration was based on a survey of 96 college presidents regarding what they perceived to be the factors contributing to their selection as president, the job challenges, and the future of the community college presidency. Researchers examined the data to rank those perceptions, skills, challenges, tasks, and strategies identified by college presidents as most important to their current positions. Results include: (1) communicator was perceived to be the most significant role of a president, followed by innovator and facilitator; (2) presidential challenges named were keeping pace with the increased costs of technology; increasing partnerships with industry; encouraging the maintenance of high-quality faculty; addressing issues of professional growth and training for administrators, faculty, and staff; obtaining financial resources; encouraging more articulation between high schools and their institutions; and identifying leadership potential from among the faculty and support staff; and (3) institutional vision and revitalization was rated as the most important presidential leadership dimension. This document poses a need for preparation programs and continuing education on the basic skill of communication, and questions how this can be further developed to be broad-based and inclusive. (Contains 20 references.) (VWC)

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Challenges, Roles, and the Future of 2-Year College Presidents

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Abstract

The purpose for conducting this study was to explore the professional dimensions of being selected for and maintaining the position of 2-year college president. The exploration was based on a survey of 96 college presidents regarding what they perceived to be the factors contributing to their selection as president, the job challenges, and future of the community college presidency. The study examined the data to identify and rank the perceptions according to their perceived importance.

"Challenges, Roles, and the Future of 2-Year College Presidents"

Myran (1983) observed that "those within community colleges realized that the future does not just happen, rather, creating the future starts in the minds and hearts of key decision makers, and it is given shape by their will and energy" (p. 4). As such, the issue of leadership, particularly in higher education, has become an important issue and question to be studied (Miller, Spurgin, & Holder, 1992). This question has been studied extensively from the perspective of the private sector. However, a review of the literature has shown that only a few studies have been conducted on public college and university presidents, and even fewer studies on community college presidents. This creates difficulty for search committees and governing boards attempting to complete position searches for community college presidents. Milosheff (1990) noted that the "community college system has become one of the primary settings of postsecondary education in America" (p. 12), and statistics have shown that they enroll more than 40% of all undergraduates; both factors contribute to the importance of the community college president's position.

Cohen and Brawer (1996) argued that while student enrollment has increased, administrative staff decreased and tuition costs have risen. Another problem that has emerged for 2-year colleges is their public image. Cohen and Brawer claimed the responsibility for the college's image is the president's, and that the professional background, academic credentials, and personality characteristics all play important roles

in how the president interprets the position and implements strategies to deal (or not deal) with institutional images.

Cohen and Brawer also noted that "the role of the president of a 2-year college has changed drastically as the purpose and mission of the college has been redirected" (p. 4). As faculty, staff, and community advocate groups have grown stronger and more vocal, the role of the presidency has become more circumscribed. Despite this, the president has maintained the image of visionary, spokesperson, interpreter, and executive for the 2-year college. Presidents have also been seen as the scapegoats for diminishing morale, reduced external funding, duplication of program, and many other attendant problems. The study was subsequently designed to broadly explore the professional dimensions of selecting and maintaining the position of 2-year college president. This exploration was based on a survey of the beliefs of presidents regarding the factors that were significant in their selection to the presidency. In particular, the study attempted to identify and rank those criteria, skills, challenges, tasks, and strategies identified by college presidents as most important in their specific selection to their current positions as presidents.

Presidential Careers

Atwell and others have conducted many studies over the past three decades (Hawk, 1960; Roberts, 1964; Johnston, 1965; Wing, 1972; Gilli, 1976; Vaughan, 1986, Vaughan, 1990; Vaughan, 1992) on the profile and career paths of college and university presidents. Atwell (1980) studied the independent non-proprietary junior college presidency, and found that the mean age was 55.1 years with a median age of 57; 40%

were more than 60 years old, and 21% were 45 or younger. Levin (1995) argued that the presidency continues to be an influential office in the institution's functioning, and that these influences can be either functional or dysfunctional.

Myran and others (1995) presented their analysis of the status of community college leadership for the next century, arguing that leadership will and must be learner-based. Everyone involved with the college, including the president and trustees, will be learners, and will work continuously to improve learning. College programs, services, processes, and staff skills will be constantly under improvement. Creating new visions and restructuring process and organizations to achieve those visions, they argued, is what leadership in the next century will be about. Organizational changes are beginning to appear, and can only be fostered in a climate of trust built by college leaders.

Smith (1995), after a retreat of the President's Academy of the American Association of Community Colleges, wrote that community college presidents must struggle with balancing the multiple roles, including college president, spouse, parent, community member and civic leader, and more. These multiple roles combine to exert tremendous pressure on the professional, and the result is a demand that a president must know, develop, and maintain a set of professional skills that enhance rather than detract from serving as an effective leader. Smith noted that the primary response strategy should be to resist the temptation of doing everything at and for the college. In a sense, the successful president is one who is knowledgeable of the personal abilities necessary for college operation, and has and enhances these abilities to the extent that the institution needs them. The successful presidential candidate, then, is one who is able to convey the

effectiveness of these personal abilities or attributes to the unique setting of an institution.

Bromert (1988) attempted to explain the mystique surrounding college and university search committees. She suggested that the use of search committees have burgeoned so rapidly on most campuses that few colleges and universities have developed a rational, systematic method for organizing such efforts. Historically, boards of trustees have used search committees in advisory capacities to help in the selection of chief administrative officers. Representative constituencies, including faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the community at-large were gathered to help find the most acceptable, qualified administrator (Bromert, 1984). These committees, however, are reliant on human judgement skills and often behave as such.

The complexity of the college presidency lies in serving the local board of trustees, responding to state or regional systems, satisfying local constituents and students, while at the same time responding to the academic and professional needs of faculty. Identifying an individual with these unique skills is the ultimate objective the presidential search committee.

Research Methods

Community college administration has been increasingly studied by both practitioners and faculty in professional education graduate programs. These efforts have ranged from the "classic" works of Parnell, Cohen and Brawer, and Deegan, to the more recent efforts to examine middle-level leadership in these colleges (Seagren, et al, 1994).

The Seagren, et al (1994) survey of community college department chairs was modified and adapted for use with 2-year college presidents. Using a random national sample of 100 2-year college presidents, the 50-item survey requested participants ratings of items on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1=Not Important, 3=Neutral, and 5=Very Important.

The first section of the survey asked that respondents rate the importance they perceive for their role as a 2-year college president. A total of 13 roles were identified for rating. The second section provided respondents an opportunity to rate the importance they perceive on 33 job challenges. The third section asked participants to rate the importance of four future leadership dimensions necessary for 2-year colleges. The survey, an adaptation of the Seagren work, was determined to be reliable and valid with an internal reliability index of approximately .9180, based on the verification presented by the Seagren team in 1994.

Preceding the mailing of the survey instrument, a mailing was sent to the secretary of each president, alerting them to the forthcoming survey. A day prior to mailing, a FAX was sent to each secretary, alerting them of the mailing and the importance of the president's participation. With one follow-up mailing, 96 of the 100 presidents completed and returned the survey instrument.

Findings

Research Question 1

What are the predominant factors in 2-year college administrators being named to their current positions as presidents?

In the first section of the survey, presidents were asked to rate the degree of importance they perceived each item had in their selection to the presidential position. The data indicated that seven roles were identified as important, with mean scores ranging from 3.94 to 4.79. The responses were collapsed into three categories: Somewhat Important and Very Important (termed "importance"), Neutral, and Not Important and Little Importance. This format for collapsing data has been similarly used by such researchers as Seagren, et al (1994) and McCormack (1995). The role of communicator was perceived to be the most important with a 96.8% level of importance and a mean rating of 4.79. The order of importance of the remaining items were innovator with a 92.6% level of importance and a mean of 4.45; facilitator with a 91.6% level of importance and a mean of 4.34; visionary with an 89.5% level of importance and a mean of 4.39; resource allocator with an 87.5% level of importance and a mean of 4.14; advocator with an 86.5% level of importance and a mean of 4.16; conflict resolver with a 70.8% level of importance and a mean of 3.94.

Those roles identified as least important were: delegator with a 69.4% level of importance and a mean of 3.66; negotiator with a 60.4% level of importance and a mean of 3.77; evaluator with a 54.2% level of importance and a mean of 3.56; fund raiser with a 53.1% level of importance and a mean of 3.39; mentor with a 45.8% level of importance

and a mean of 3.36; and care taker with a 34.4% level of importance and a mean of 2.98 (see Table 1).

Research Question 2

What are the primary job challenges that are perceived to be confronting 2-year college presidents?

The job challenges facing 2-year college presidents appear to be determined by the roles they adopt once they have been selected to the position. This belief appears to be supported by the results of Section II of the survey. Seagren, et al (1994) pointed out that "if one tends to focus on maintaining the status quo, then job challenges may be short-term limited in scope" (p. 48). However, Riggs and Ackor (1992) offered a converse perspective. They pointed out that "if one views oneself as a visionary, job challenges may be longer-term in nature and broader in scope. What is perceived as important by the individual will shape the future of the institution" (p. 58).

Data indicated a wide range of agreement among the presidents, from a high of 97.9% level of agreement and a mean of 4.68 for keeping pace with the increased cost of technology to a low of 26% level of agreement for establishing more campuses, with a mean of 2.61. There were six additional challenges that indicated a 91.6% or higher level of agreement. Those challenges were: increasing partnership with business and industry (96.9%), encouraging the maintenance of high quality faculty (93.7%), addressing issues of professional growth and training for administrators, faculty, and support staff (92.7%), obtaining financial resources (91.6%), encouraging more articulation between high schools

and the institution (91.6%), and identifying leadership potential from among the faculty and support staff (91.6%).

Table 2 presents a frequency distribution of the data analysis for the presidents' responses in survey Section III. There were two questions that were duplicated to test for consistency. The responses were combined and adjusted in the calculation.

Research Question 3

What leadership dimensions do current 2-year college presidents perceive as important for future 2-year college presidents?

Table 3 presents information related to leadership dimensions for future 2-year college presidents. The current presidents were asked to rate the degree of importance they attached to each of the four dimensions.

Institutional vision and revitalization was rated with a 98.9% level of importance and a mean rating of 4.82. This dimension was consistent with the role of visionary presented in Research Question 1.

Institutional empowerment and transformation with a level of importance to 94.8% and a mean of 4.71, and institutional conceptualization and survival with a level of importance at 94.7% and a mean of 4.5 were dimensions that reflected the role of innovator, facilitator, and evaluator, which were identified as important roles in the selection process (Hood, 1997). Flannagan (1949) identified these dimensions as

important factors in the leadership development of chief executive officers in the private sector. The results of the study suggest that these dimensions are equally as important in 1998.

The future for 2-year college presidents will require that individuals who plan to enter administrative positions have a strong institutional vision; be able to revitalize their institutions; develop and maintain a strong conceptual framework that will help the institution to survive amidst the turbulence of the times; and be able to deal with the politics that will envelop the institution.

Discussion

Community colleges are playing an increasingly important role in the general, broad interpretation of what society interprets as needed education. Providing the skilled workforce, basic education, community education, and college transfer services, community, junior, and technical colleges require unique and highly trained leadership. This leadership, embedded throughout many college layers, is most visible at the presidential level, and as such, expanded activities for these leaders is paramount. These activities are needed as both a response to immediate challenges and problems, but also for those that will evolve and present themselves over the next several decades. Forecasting challenges and needed skills in this manner is not new or unique, yet is seldom practiced by graduate preparation programs or professional associations.

The current study re-inforces the idea that leaders are those who can communicate effectively, and that the content of the communication has a great deal to do with the

presidency. The primary leadership dimension identified by college presidents was an ability to transfer a vision to and throughout the institution. Interestingly, these same respondents identified financial and technology issues as their primary job challenges. These same kinds of skills and issues have been reported by George Vaughn, among others, and allude to basic administrative abilities as the framework for the effective presidency. An ability to communicate and provide vision are not unique to the community college president position, yet to provide these effectively in the context of multiple institutional and personal roles provides a challenge. A primary difficulty for any sort of in-service or pre-service developmental activity, then, is to provide a mechanism for the managerial expertise necessary to handling multiple tasks in an ambiguous, changing environment.

Community college presidents must learn the valuable lesson of how to deal with multiple demands, and to express value for the non-profitable programs or initiatives that make the community college so central to their host communities. The difficulty at the presidential level is the expression of value for programs that provide a social service, but may not be as financially lucrative as some contract training or continuing education programs. Special attention also needs to be given to the value and social service benefits of vocational and occupational training degree and certificate programs that are expensive to operate and serve a very specific service. Presidents, more than anything else, need to learn how the balance of academic integrity and profitability co-exist.

In the context of the contemporary 2-year college, these findings were not

surprising or controversial. What they do articulate is a need for preparation programs and continuing education on the basic skill of communication and how this can be further developed to be broad-based and inclusive. The problem, of course, is that presidents are senior individuals who may not see basic communication instruction as the type of training necessary for their success. This training, however, must be presented in a non-threatening forum that values diversity and addresses issues such as conflict resolution, team work, individual empowerment, and joint authority. Training programs also need to be presented in an environment reflective of the seriousness and dignity of the president's position.

A replication of this study with other community college leaders may prove particularly revealing, possibly identifying differences in challenges based on administrative level. These are important issues that need to be studied, and much of the success of this research will be dependent upon 2-year college presidents demonstrating that they value this information.

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Table 1.

Frequency Table for Ratings of Predominant Roles

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Communicator	96.8%	2.1%	1.0%	4.79 (.52)
Innovator	92.6	4.2	3.2	4.45 (.77)
Facilitator	91.6	7.4	1.1	4.34 (.66)
Visionary	89.5	6.3	4.1	4.39 (.90)
Resource Allocator	87.5	9.4	3.1	4.14 (.71)
Advocator	86.5	6.3	7.3	4.16 (.94)
Conflict Resolver	70.8	27.1	2.1	3.94 (.78)
Delegator	69.4	13.7	16.9	3.66 (.95)
Negotiator	60.4	29.2	10.4	3.77 (1.03)
Evaluator	54.2	40.6	5.2	3.56 (.71)
Fund Raiser	53.1	27.1	19.8	3.39 (1.17)
Mentor	45.8	36.5	17.7	3.36 (1.01)
Care Taker	34.4	33.3	32.3	2.98 (1.20)

Table 2.

Frequency Table for Ratings of Job Challenges

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Identifying and securing state-of-the art technical equipment.	97.9%	1.0%	1.0%	4.60 (.62)
Keeping pace with the increasing cost of technology	97.9	1.0	1.0	4.68 (.61)
Increasing partnerships with business and industry	96.9	2.1	1.0	4.77 (.53)
Encouraging the maintenance of high quality faculty	93.7	3.1	3.1	4.54 (.71)
Addressing issues of professional growth and training for administrators, faculty, and support	92.7	5.1	2.1	4.44 (.69)
Obtaining financial resources	91.6	5.2	3.1	4.46 (.86)
Encouraging more articulation between high schools and the institution	91.6	6.3	2.1	4.41 (.70)

Table 2, continued

Frequency Table for Ratings of Job Challenges

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Identifying leadership potential from among the faculty and support staff	91.6	6.3	2.1	4.35 (.70)
Addressing accountability issues	88.5	7.3	4.2	4.29 (.78)
Encouraging the increased use of the computer in the classroom	88.5	7.3	4.1	4.28 (.82)
Offering courses through distance education	88.5	7.3	4.1	4.26 (.81)
Changing the institutional mission in response to technological development	87.5	8.3	4.2	4.30 (.80)
Providing leadership training for faculty and support staff	85.4	14.6	0.0	4.24 (.69)
Attracting new student populations	85.4	11.5	3.1	4.25 (.78)

Table 2, continued

Frequency Table for Ratings of Job Challenges

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Encouraging more faculty development techniques	85.4	7.3	7.3	4.06 (.81)
Assessing future employment trends and opportunities	84.3	9.4	6.3	4.24 (.87)
Encouraging the strengthening of Institutional curriculum	83.4	10.4	6.3	4.24 (.88)
Accommodating cultural diversity within the institution	83.3	9.4	7.3	4.11 (.93)
Advocating new teaching methods and techniques	82.3	12.5	5.2	4.24 (.87)
Adapting to the utilization of electronic communication systems	82.3	8.3	9.4	4.06 (.89)
Responding to the needs of a wider range of students	78.1	18.7	3.1	4.07 (.80)

Table 2, continued

Frequency Table for Ratings of Job Challenges

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Expanding services for at-risk and disadvantaged students	77.1	15.6	7.3	4.02 (.98)
Increasing influence and impact of state coordinating boards	77.0	8.3	14.6	3.89 (1.11)
Promoting environmental scanning	71.9	19.8	8.3	3.85 (.96)
Instituting quality management techniques	71.8	16.7	11.4	3.91 (1.06)
Promoting greater gender equity in administration, faculty, and support staff	67.7	26.0	5.2	3.79 (.85)
Increasing teaching programs sponsored by specific companies	67.7	21.9	10.5	3.75 (1.01)
Eliminating costly programs	63.6	32.3	4.2	3.74 (.76)

Table 2, continued

Frequency Table for Ratings of Job Challenges

Roles	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Increasing involvement of the federal government in the establishment of programs to assist welfare and unemployed populations	63.5	26.0	10.4	3.71 (.95)
Advocating for more capital construction	56.3	28.2	15.7	3.61 (1.24)
Increasing institutional emphasis on transfer programs	53.1	38.5	8.4	3.53 (.85)
Directing bond referendum	33.4	30.2	36.5	2.86 (1.42)
Establishing more campuses	26.0	29.2	54.8	2.61 (1.39)

Table 3.

Frequency Table for Ratings of Leadership Dimensions

Leadership Dimension	Somewhat Important and Very Important 4-5	Neutral 3	Not Important and Little Importance 1-2	Mean (SD)
Institutional vision and revitalization	98.9%	1.0%	0.0%	4.82 (.52)
Institutional empowerment (.63) and transformation	94.8	3.1	2.1	4.71
Institutional conceptualization and survival	94.7	3.1	2.1	4.56 (.66)
Political leadership	91.6	5.2	3.1	4.45 (.74)